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CROSS PURPOSES

A Christmas Experience in Seven Chapters.

BY T. C. DE LEON.

Author of "Creole and Puritan," "The Rock or the Rye," "Four Years in Rebel Capitals," etc.

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CHAPTER IV—Continued.

She dropped her face into her hands as she spoke the last word, but all the rest she had said with her eyes fixed unwaveringly upon mine and looking down into my very soul. I am considered by most of my friends to be rather a modest man. On this particular occasion I must confess that I was rather taken aback and became rather restless in the mind. But there could be no doubt as to what the girl meant. Driven to desperation by her forced admission, feeling the unbearable grasp of a hated fate tightening on her, she was—yes, there was no room for doubt—she was making love to me!

For a second the base idea crept into my mind, Revenge! Betsey Blythe, the shameless flirt, cannot triumph over me! I, the hero of the "Shadybrook" instead of the poor lawyer's daughter! For a second I was on the eve of clasping the White Mouse in my arms, and blackening my soul with the perjury that I adored her—that I never had loved but her!

Thank heaven! It was only for a second, when the unnatural, the frightful want of modesty stood naked in my sight. Much as I had despised the girl before, I actually loathed her now. But to tell her so! There was the rub. I appeal to any young lawyer who has had an heiress make love to him at midnight if it isn't a little awkward to refuse her!

"Miss Bolton," I said at last, looking into the fire, "I make every allowance for your trial—for your unusual excitement that has driven you to say things to me you may wish unsaid to-morrow."

"To-morrow I shall glory in them even more than now!"

"To-morrow you may regret," I continued, heedless of the interruption, "that you said them to me."

"You are the sole man on earth to whom I would ever dream of speaking so," she broke in hastily; "to no one else could I be so inconsiderate as to—"

Here she melted into a perfect cataract of tears. I don't like tears. They wash all the manhood out of me; they dissolve me as if to regret the accident that had made the young woman care for me, and to try and be a little more gentle, I put myself through a strict cross-examination as to whether I had ever given her any cause to believe I cared for her, any encouragement, any reason. But a hastily impudently jury of conscience, habit and memory acquitted me nem. con.

Then, panting in the triple consciousness of right, I turned once more upon the young woman before me.

"Miss Bolton," I said, with an arctic frigidity in my tone, "you will permit me to say that I am astonished and—"

"Astonished! You!"

The invariable recurrence of that pronoun and the dreadful emphasis upon it were beginning to wear my patience out. I continued rather hastily:

"Astonished, surely; and I may say pained at the—"

"The confession of what I cannot but consider a passing—"

"The White Mouse flashed round at me. She seemed to expand and dilate in the flickering light, and her lips were compressed till they seemed very white in the reflection.

"May I remind you such a suspicion is injurious to my modesty?" she said, coldly; "but I know in my heart I will prove to you by my whole future that my love is a part of my being—and will only with my life!"

Did ever a modest man meet such persistence? I could not strike that girl and crush her where she stood. Oh how I longed for a man in her place! For had he been the Bonita Boy I should have pounded him then and there. Morally certain that the white-haired young creature was dying of love for me, half persuaded that she was going to marry me then and there by force, what could I say? I stared blankly at her, while a smile of wonderful sweetness stole round her lips, as she murmured, half to herself:

"Let the world say what it will; love like mine purifies all. We will be very, very happy."

Tender of heart, I began to pity the young woman. Laboring under a terrible hallucination about the future as she was, there was still something almost sublime in the faith she held in the power of her love. Its spell began to work on me. Rapidly I ran over my chances for the future if I fell into her hands. I almost began to waver, though half unconsciously, as I said:

"You would be sacrificing everything. Mr. Goldwin's fortune is immense, and—"

added, carelessly, "for my aunt could not be angry with me a week. She would forget her disappointment—we should both be equally dead to her."

Here was bold in Goldwin; for the ancient Griffin, besides the Grove estate, was reputed "very warm." I looked thoughtfully into the fire, and the words fell upon my shocked modesty and sorely wounded self-love like a hot iron.

Eric—brown front on the avenue—all passed in rapid panorama between my eyes and the glowing coals. There was a half-reckoning in my voice as I said, "Are you very sure of that?"

"Very sure. But what of that? He whom I love!" and the girl fixed her eyes full upon mine with never a blink nor a tremor—"he whom I love would value it all as trash."

The deuce he would! Then I little knew myself. But the information just given was sufficient, and I began to see daylight. I actually believe for the last ten minutes I had forgotten the very existence of Betsey Blythe. I had not even remembered the little shock to my pride at finding out her duplicity—had lost even my ire at Tom Jones' perfidy. I was doing a little sum in mental arithmetic, in which the White Mouse was the exponent of an unknown power of farm, manor house and woodland.

But I could not restrain my desire to speak at least part of the truth. She was leaning now upon the mantel, her pale forehead resting upon her right hand and her left hanging carelessly by her side. I took that left hand in my own, not without a twinge of conscience.

"You and I have long been friends," I said. "We are sympathetic, perhaps, but we hardly know each other well enough yet to speak surely of certain things."

She withdrew her hand very gently. "Why not?" she asked.

"Because it may be—that is—it was horribly embarrassing to explain—"are you very sure that you love—that you know your own mind?"

"As sure as that I live!" She spoke earnestly and absently, but looked straight into the fire and not at me.

"And you do—you think—that is you have—in your own mind you have reason to trust that?"

"Had I not a certainty beyond trust—beyond reason," she broke in—"I had been false to my sex to speak to-night to you."

Wonderful power of love! Wonderful confidence of passion!

But where in the deuce had I ever given her one reason to believe I cared for her? Once more the triple jury held a hasty session over me; once more I was triumphantly acquitted.

"Anna," I said—very gently now—"perhaps your aunt would not forgive. Would you be willing to sacrifice everything, to endure poverty even, for the sake of your love?" The girl only looked at me for answer, but that strange smile flickered once more around her lips.

"And suppose you do another more than justice—suppose your loss of fortune should change feelings you now believe?"

"Never!" she said. "My love is too secure for that."

"And would it override all obstacles? Would it forgive a recent rivalry and the love that is even now scarcely driven from the heart you would make your own?"

Anna Bolton, the White Mouse, turned short upon me. Something in my words transfused her. She was a very Pythonesse, and her eyes flashed fire as she drew her slender height up before me.

"Silence, sir!" she cried. "Perhaps I am rightly punished for forgetting I was still a maiden who should not speak. When you spoke of money, you merely injured me. To intimate the possibility of a rival is insult! After all I have said to you, after all you know, it is bitter insult, which I will not listen to."

And the young person swept out of the room, utterly ignoring the hand I stretched out to detain her.

I looked stupidly into the fire. And even as I gazed the face that rose before me was not Anna's, but Betsey Blythe's.

CHAPTER V. IN THE DEPTHS.



"She told me she could make it all right with you."

How long I gazed stupidly into the fire I know not, but the shadow of the past rose out of it, shutting out the present utterly. No sooner was the pressure of her presence taken off than my mind rebounded from the White Mouse. I forgot her very existence.

Blacker and blacker grew the coals, and with them the gloom of my thoughts grew deeper and deeper; but, bitter as they were, the cold became more bitter still, and I was literally driven by it to seek my own room.

As I entered the door I almost ran over the hoolier, who was still engaged in his mysterious interview with Tom.

"And are you sure you understand perfectly, Bosley?" the latter was saying. "We must have no risk of a mistake this trip."

for Jalap's kickin' of his near foreleg." "Right as a trivet, Bosley! You're a trump, and this is yours," and Tom checked the fellow a bright half eagle as he left the room. Then he jerked off his coat and lighted an Havana.

I could stand it no longer.

As the grunting groan left the room I turned upon Tom and prepared to charge. "Hold a bit, old boy," he said. "I have treated you badly, I know."

A fierce snarl was the only response I designed to give.

"You, I know it, but prudence was essential. You're not hurt?"

"Riled," I answered, with forced calmness. "I can't see how you have used me badly, but you must permit me to say you have done yourself great injury."

Tom seemed a little puzzled.

"And you have done a palpable, a gross injustice—"I was grand now, doing the outraged virtuous—"to an old person who?"

"Oh, bother the old person!" he interrupted, carelessly. "But then you have really twiggled what I am up to in the morning?"

"In the morning?" A ray of light began to dawn upon me.

"Yes, in the morning. I'm going to—now, old boy, don't look soled—I'm going to run away and be married!"

"To be married? And in the morning? The ray of light was a blinding gleam now. I was literally staggered. I dropped into a chair with a big lump in my throat."

"Yes, my boy, I'm to be married in the morning. You know I have told you before, but Bet and I only fixed it yesterday. She arranged it all in the design as we came along; and, for reasons you know so well, we must be quick; I'm done for if the old party suspects. But it's all fixed—you're to help me."

"I help you?" I gasped, faintly.

"Certainly. Who else? You must come with us; you must be best man; you must go with us to Uncle Bob and Miss Bet explain all about the—"

"Lieutenant Jones?" I rose stiffly and stood at attention as Tom's eyes opened very wide—"Lieutenant Jones, I have no criticisms to make on your cousin's course. If she desires to—"

"Desire! the devil! Why, man, she planned the whole thing—arranged the Christmas frolic, suggested all the details of the elopement, and she specially insisted you should aid us."

"She did?"

"Yes, she said you were so fond of us both you'd be glad to do it."

Oh, the cruel girl! the hardened, ingrained flirt! This was why she had led me on then. Tom kept on, speaking rapidly, but with no sense to me in the sound of his caught.

"So you see, my dear boy, it was she who originated the affair; she planned every detail, not I."

"Stop sir!" I cried, hoarsely—"my face must have been purple; it felt black—"you have a right to run away, perhaps—to stoop to anything you please—the lady is to be your wife. But, by heaven! you have no right to compromise your cousin by saying these things."

"There's something in that," Tom muttered, thoughtfully. "I mustn't let Bet's name get out, of course. I only told you, you know." I gave a grunt that was meant for scolding sarcasm. "Bet will tell you all about it herself."

"Oh, she will," I panted.

"To be sure. She told me she could make it all right with you. That's what we were talking about when you drove over the day before."

Oh, the cold, blooded, heartless coquette! To deliberately plan a torment for me thus! And he, my old schoolmate, my bosom friend! If the soft answer that turneth away wrath had been a deadly weapon I should have used it then. But it wasn't, so I said no word, only strode about the room, loosing my neckcloth by force and sudden tugs.

Tom, lying flat on his back and puffing little wreaths into the air, eyed me with some wonderment. At last he said cheerily:

"Well, old boy, don't take on so. It's as sudden for me as it is for you, and a decent sight more serious to boot. So I'll count on you of course in the morning."

"Count on me! I tell you I'll have nothing to do with it. Your uncle Blythe would never!"

"Two Tom had drawn his head and moved his lips in a frigid smile to speak twice a torrent of staid passion had swept over him."

And then a moment over his face a look of monstrous thought was traced, and he said:

he looked it in the pillow again. There was something in his eyes that made me shudder with a shudder, unbidden, dread that his reason might give way.

Now he lay quiet. He had ceased to sob, but his face was still buried in the pillow, while ever and again a quick, systemic shudder ran through him.

I laid my hand kindly on his shoulder: "Tom, old fellow, I was hoarse."

He slipped away from my touch like a hot child, and again the shudder, longer and more marred than before, thrilled through him.

I respected his feelings too much to look upon his suffering; I knew on the candle.

"My dear old boy!" he muttered hoarsely. The voice was still much broken, with a hysterical catch in it. I only pressed his hand for answer, but I felt the bed shake under me with the effort he made to control himself. It was a mighty one. Then he spoke again.

"We have been friends for years," he said. "You know me for a man of honor, and I pledge you that honor my—my—"

use will be fully and entirely satisfied when—when he learns—that—that I have married his daughter!"

Once more his feelings overcame him; once more he crashed his face into the pillow while the gust of passion rent and shook him.

I was more mystified than ever.

Was he deceiving me? No, he was a man of honor; he would never stoop to that. But, then, why this terrible emotion he could not control?

A startling thought leaped into my brain. Great heaven! was Tom drunk? Had he gotten liquor from Bosley, the hoolier? No, that was too absurd.

I gave it up; I was dead beat.

Still wondering, I threw myself ready dressed upon the bed. Tom lay quiet now, but I intended to watch him by the faint firelight, lest his intense excitement should make him really ill.

But the narcotic administered by the ancient spinster, added to my unwonted exertions behind those demon horses in the frosty air, were too much for me. I slept profoundly.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DARK HOUR BEFORE DAY.



"You'll take Bet," Tom whispered hoarsely in my ear.

How long I slept I know not, but I was lying only half awakened when I heard a very gentle tap at the door.

The moon had risen, and her great white disk shone clear over the trees, throwing a broad light into the room. Tom had the tap and sprang up on the instant. By the moonlight I saw that he was dressed as when he first threw himself down, and could not have been to bed. As he opened the door gently:

"Sh—h, dear Tom!" said a soft voice in the hall. "The moon is up, and I heard Bosley take the sleigh over the snow about ten minutes since."

"I'm all ready, Bet dear; won't be a minute."

"I couldn't trust the servants, of course, and fearing you'd be too late, I thought I'd call you myself," Betsey answered.

Great heavens! what an escape I had made! How had I misunderstood that girl! Here was a bride elect on the very verge of a runaway waking her lover herself, urging haste in his movements, and generally being as cool as a cucumber.

"That's right," she added coolly. "Anna's all ready, and the old lady sleeps like William Tell; no hurry, dear."

I breathed a fraction more freely. At all events, she was to have another female in the escape. That would be more respectable, perhaps, when the affair came to be talked of. But how had she persuaded that little milk-and-water thing to brave her Argus and the propitiation at such an hour and for such a purpose?

I actually pinched myself to see if I was really awake. The whole thing seemed like an ugly dream, and I could scarcely realize that a single day could have crowded into it the overturn of all my hopes that had almost grown to certainties; the substitution of so unexpected a rival; and, more than all, the unheard-of fact of Anna Bolton stepping so far out of her modesty as to make me a formal declaration of love!

Not I was wide awake. The whole scene was only too real, and there was Betsey Blythe standing at our door in the gray dawn. She was really going to run away with her cousin. She had in very fact driven me to desperation, and she had actually persuaded the White Mouse to rebellion.

It was really remarkable what wonderful ways she could exert over all who came within her influence. And yet there was no tremor in her voice to show the slightest agitation. By George, she was going to consummate matrimony as she would to her breakfast!

"Be's ready. He's going with us, of course," Miss Blythe definitely said. "You told him I would write that?"

An irrepressible groan of rage and despair burst from me. They did not notice it as Tom answered:

"Oh, yes. But you must be careful to explain fully as soon as you can."

points, showed two muffled and veiled figures waiting us.

"You'll take Bet," Tom whispered hoarsely in my ear. Then more he pressed both hands against his face as if to repress his feelings.

Like an animated statue I advanced and offered my arm to the veiled figure nearest me. For I was resolved! She should never have one ray of triumph over me to brighten the darkness of the wrong she was about to do her darling father.

I noticed the little hand she rested on my arm trembled slightly. She had some feeling, then? It was more than I had suspected, but I only grew stouter and stouter. I set my face like a flint. Tom approached her companion very quietly, drew her arm through his with more defiance than I thought necessary with such a weak, name little heiress, and led the way out of the hall on tiptoe. Silent as the grave we followed.

As we stepped out into the moonlight I felt rather than saw the veiled face by me turn up to mine. I shivered from head to foot, but that perhaps was partly owing to the bitter cold of the dawn, and looked straight ahead. Then once more I heard that bursting but repressed sigh; once more the tremor of her frame was so painfully evident that I almost wavered in my belief of her love for me.

Did she at last repent? Did she really feel the heavy crime she was committing toward her father? Or great heaven! could there be the bare possibility that she had a sudden thought that she felt that even now it was not too late—that she had not utterly thrown away a heart she could never replace? There was such delirium in the bare idea I almost framed the wild hope into words; but pride as much as honor came to my rescue. I was pledged to Tom, and was silent.

Softly and swiftly we followed the other couple over the crisp, crackling surface of the snow down the broad lane, under arching trees that afforded the moonlight through them in silver spangles; through snow-laden hedges standing like an army of specters at present arms.

Here we found the sleigh, the impatient horses blowing out great clouds of mist, and the more impatient groom blowing out greater clouds of smoke from his black pipe.

"Well, lieutenant, we're pretty high a freckle," was his salutation. "All ready, sir, and we'll be in just five minutes; do the nineteen miles in two hours sure!"

Tom answered never a word. He almost lifted the light form of his bride-maid into the back seat, and as he tucked the buffalo around her with most unnecessary care I saw she had pressed her handkerchief to her eyes and was sobbing bitterly. Poor fragile child! I thought. To feel thus for the folly of another, and that other—I owe one glance, my first, at the still figure on my arm. Not a sign was there of any emotion, not a single ray of feeling, not a spark of repentance.

"I'll drive," Tom said to me shortly.

He looked very grave and pale now as he bundled his bride into the front seat with much less ceremony than he had used to her bridesmaid. Then he gathered up the reins as I stepped in beside the still weeping blonde.

We were off.

CHAPTER VII.

VICTORY!



She put her loyal hand in mine and murmured, very gently:

We took a road utterly unknown to me—up hill and down.

No one spoke a word. I had plenty of time to think, but somehow my brain refused to come in any sort of order. One thought, however, kept rolling up and down in the swirling stream of ideas—no true to my proud resolve not to aid her triumph by one word look or even a glance.

And there she sat, crunched up in the buffalo, holding her head before her face, and seemingly more anxious about the tip of her nose than about her future state. Once she turned, looked pityingly at her weeping friend.

"Don't cry, Anna darling. It will soon be over."